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ABSTRACT

In response to the information need of prospective students, parents, and high school guidance counselors, the University of Wisconsin system initiated a service unique among multicampus systems in the United States. The Higher Education Location Program, or HELP, is a statewide, toll-free telephone counseling service designed to provide one central source of information concerning any 2-year center, 4-year campus, or extension program in the University of Wisconsin system. After an initial 4-month pilot period, an extensive followup study was conducted to determine the need for HELP and the effectiveness it has on the work of university admissions staff, as well as high school guidance counselors. The pilot period having warranted HELP's continuance, serveral innovations were made in the program to increase its effectiveness. These are also discussed. (Author)

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THE HIGHER EDUCATION LOCATION PROGRAM

H.E.L.P.

Wisconsin's Answer to a Multi-Campus System's Information Crisis

by

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As institutions grow, there is often times a natural tendency for them to become detached from their constituencies. Colleges and universities are no exceptions. The traditional collegiality of higher education becomes bureaucratized as enrollments increase, buildings multiply, and academic departments expand. With the 1971 merger of the former University of Wisconsin and the former Wisconsin State Universities, two already large institutions of higher education were combined to form a super institution, the University of Wisconsin System -- the fourth largest educational network in the United States.

The creation of this new educational system in Wisconsin brought with it a myriad of problems for high school students, parents and guidance counselors who were faced with an overnight information crisis. Before the ink on the merger bill was dry, questions arose: What are the new University admissions policies? Will there be a uniform credit transfer policy for the System? Which campuses offer a major in electrical engineering? What will be the fate of the two-year centers?

With these very questions in mind a colleague of mine and I sat over a sandwich and beer one noon last winter and discussed possible ways to respond to this information need. Out of that lunch-time brainstorming session evolved a new service offered by the University of Wisconsin System, which I would like to discuss with you this morning. The service is called the Higher Education Location Program -- or HELP -- a toll-free, state-wide telephone counseling service designed to provide one central source of

information for anyone in Wisconsin who has questions concerning any UW four-year campus, two-year center or Extension program. HELP was initiated in March, 1973, as a pilot project to run for a four-month period, after which time we planned to conduct a follow-up study and analysis to determine the need and effectiveness of such a service. With the study in mind, we had the trained counselors who staffed the program keep log sheets on each call received to record the caller's question and the counselor's answer to the question. Also recorded on the sheets were the caller's name, city, phone number, and campus preference, if any. Using the information on the log sheets, we conducted a follow-up telephone survey with separate questionnaires designed for each of the four groups of callers: high school students, guidance counselors, parents and others. The fact that HELP is in full operation for the 1973-74 academic year hints to the results of the follow-up study.

In the next few minutes, I would like to give you an overview of those results, and discuss:

(1) The operation of the program;

(2) the need for a service like HELP in Wisconsin; and

(3) some possible implications HELP could have on the operation of the UW System.

At the outset, my colleague and I saw HELP's function as twofold: First, we felt it should be a clearing house of information for general questions concerning the UW System; and second, we felt it should serve as a referral service for callers with special questions concerning a particular UW campus. In the latter cases, the caller's name, phone number

and question would be referred to the appropriate campus admissions office. The caller would then be contacted by a campus staff member best equipped to answer his or her question. In preparation for this dual function, each UW System campus and the main offices of the Center System and Extension were requested to supply the HELP counselors with their campus catalogs, financial aids and housing information, and special program descriptions. The counselors also contacted admissions office personnal throughout the UW System to become acquainted and to establish contact for referral purposes.

A Madison-based WATS line facility, with a 24-hour answering service, is used for the program. HELP counselors are on duty from 1:00 in the afternoon until 8:00 in the evening, Monday through Friday, to take incoming calls transferred from the WATS line. In the event someone calls when the counselors are not on duty, the caller is asked to leave his name, telephone number, and the time at which he would like to be called back. The counselors receive these messages each day when they report for work and return the call.

A modest publicity effort was undertaken to introduce HELP throughout the state. UW System President John C. Weaver announced the initiation of the program through a statewide news release three days prior to the first day of operation. In addition, a letter was sent from the President, along with flyers describing the program, to every high school guidance department in the state. Two months later facilities were made available to produce a one-minute tape describing HELP which was sent to every radio station in the state, along with a letter requesting public service air time.

In addition to the information need I mentioned earlier, several factors operating on the Wisconsin higher education scene today point up the need for a service like HELP.

First, in conversations with President Weaver about a year and a half ago, Wisconsin Governor Patrick J. Lucey expressed his concern for ways to best utilize the strengths and specialties of the individual campuses in the U.W. System. He was interested in some mechanism for linking a student's academic interest with the campus best able to fulfill his career or educational plans. The Governor suggested to President Weaver that the University might examine ways to place students in programs best suited to their needs. What his comments really boiled down to was a centralized admissions process. Obviously President Weaver wasn't obviously enthusiastic with the Governor's idea of centralized admissions, but he was sensitive to the problem the Governor was addressing. Clearly, the best use is made of University programs and facilities by students who want and need them most. But in a University System as large as Wisconsin's, a student sometimes has difficulty knowing where the programs best suited for him are offered. So through the HELP program we attempted to reduce that difficulty and assist the student in making the best decision about which campus he should attend.

The second major factor behind establishing HELP grew out of what is now a living, breathing, growing animal in Wisconsin higher education: merger. When the Legislature signed the merger bill in 1971, they created the fourth largest educational network in the United States. As a result, the new policies and directions for higher education brought about by this realignment of institutions, raised many questions in the minds of students, guidance counselors and parents. I might add, parenthetically, that it posed

even more questions in the minds of those administrators who were charged with implementing merger. In light of this situation, we felt there was a need for establishing one central point of contact for information concerning the U.W. System.

The third factor we considered was the reality of declining enrollments experienced at most campuses in the U.W. System. Campuses in the University Cluster which includes all four-year campuses except Madison and Milwaukee, were experiencing a shortfall in their enrollment from what was projected. We felt that an effective information service could serve, indirectly, as a recruiting device. I would like to stress that this was a very minor consideration compared to the others, but it was a consideration nonetheless.

Lastly, this atmosphere of declining enrollments fueled the already fierce competition for students among the U.W. System campuses. As many of you know, the amount of instructional money budgeted for each University of Wisconsin campus is computed through a state funding formula, the most important variable in which is the number of students enrolled at that campus. At the time we were designing the HELP program, four campuses in the System were considering services similar to HELP. We considered the telephone lines, staff, and supplies required to operate these different programs as unnecessarily duplicative and costly. It was our belief that one central information source would be far more economical, be much less confusing to the people of the state, and could be designed to serve each campus effectively.

The final program proposed last March was designed to respond to each of the concerns I have just outlined.

Regarding the Governor's concern, we felt the HELP program could assist students in selecting the U.W. campus best suited to their personal and educational needs. Through providing a free and convenient source of information about any U.W. System campus, we felt a student could make a more intelligent decision as to which campus was best suited to his needs. The results of our follow-up study indicate that this was indeed the case. Of all students surveyed, 71% said they took action after calling HELP, based on the information they were given. For example, they applied for school or financial aids, transferred to a different school, remained in school, or changed majors. Of all the callers surveyed, 71% said they took action after calling HELP, based on the information they were given. For example, they applied for school or financial aids, transferred to a different school, remained in school, or changed majors. Of all of the callers contacted in the telephone survey, 99% indicated they felt HELP was of assistance to them.

There is no way for us to determine HELP's impact on Systemwide enrollment. We can only assume from the volume of callers and their positive responses to the program that it must have played some part.

One of the areas in which I feel the HELP program was most effective was in reducing unnecessary campus duplication of effort in student recruitment. While it has by no means eliminated it, I feel that HELP has played a significant part in reducing it. After some initial hesitancy on the part of some campus officials about someone in Central Administration answering questions concerning their campus, the two-year and four-year campuses now support the HELP program with confidence and enthusiasum. I think this was brought about by three innovations made in the program for this year.

1. Before the program went into effect in October, the HELP counselors visited each four-year campus and most of the two-year centers, and met with the admissions office and high school relations directors to learn first-hand about the special program offered at each campus.
2. Secondly, each Chancellor was asked to designate a HELP contact person from among his admissions office staff to whom all calls requesting specific information about that campus would be referred by the HELP counselors. This close contact between HELP and the campuses not only improves the program's level of service, but also fosters better working relations between Central Administration and the campuses.
3. The third innovation made in the program this year is an instant follow-up survey function. Each caller is sent a stamped, self-addressed postcard which he or she is requested to return answering the following questions:
   a. Where did you first hear about the HELP program?
   b. Was your question fully answered by calling HELP?
   c. Did you make any decision or take any action following your HELP call (and if so, what was it?)

   There is also room for comments on how we can improve the program.

Regarding the concern for effective statewide dissemination of University information and the complications surrounding merger, I think HELP has demonstrated that it can serve to bring a vast network of diverse institutions closer to the people of the state and help reduce the confusion surrounding merger.

The follow-up study we conducted after the program's four-month pilot stage clearly indicared a need for HELP. Despite the modest publicity effort undertaken to introduce the program throughout the state, 714 people fro: 175 cities in Wisconsin called during the four-month period. Of these callers, 42% were high school students, 24% were guidance counselors, 16% were parents, and 18% were students already enrolled in the University System or staff members from private colleges, vocational schools, or U.W. campuses.

In making our evaluation of the need for HELP, it was necessary to determine the use and effectiveness of alternative sources of information which were available to callers. In the follow-up survey, callers were asked whethey they had made any attempts to find the answers to their questions before callin; HELP, and if so, what were they? Callers who had made other attempts to answer their questions were then asked why they resulted in calling HELP. The responses to these questions were most interesting.

Of all callers, 17% said they had made other attempts to find the answer to their questions before calling HELP. (The figure was 81% for guidance counselors.) Most students and parents said they consulted campus catalogs or their guidance counselors. Of the guidance counselors, 78% said they consulted catalogs, and 12% said they called the campuses directly.

But the last question was most intriguing. Why did they end up callin HELP? Over half of all callers said the information they received was not complete. About 25% said it was confusing to them. This clearly demonstrated to us the need for a fast, reliable, up-to-date information source.

In order to deterine the caller's opinion of and satisfaction with HELP, we asked each person in the follow-up survey whether his or her question was answered by HELP; 93% said yes, their question was answered; 5% said partially; and 2% said no.

In establishing HELP, we anticipated that some callers would ask for opinions and advice from the counselors as well as career guidance and personal counseling. We decided that these were not appropriate areas of service to be offered by HELP. Instead, the counselors were instructed to suggest referrals, if possible, to campus-based individuals throughout the System.

In several instances, however, the counselors were called upon to play an ombudsman's role for people who were experiencing difficulty contacting or effectively communicating with UW campus personnel. In these cases, HELP played a critical role in assisting people who felt they were lost in an inescapable bureaucratic maze. Except for three cases, the problems were relatively minor and merely involved putting the caller in contact with the right person in the right office. But to people who were unfamiliar with U.W. System organization, terminology and procedure, the solution to their minor problem represented a much appreciated service.

As we planned the HELP program, it occurred to us that it had great potential for influencing the work of high school guidance counselors in dealing with college bound students. We felt that HELP could have a positive effect on an essential aspect of a counselor's work---that of assisting students in examining their choice of a college, and helping them with the mechanics of entry. It seemed to us that any assistance the HELP program could afford counselors in this important area would leave them greater freedom to make contact with other students requiring their services, as well as gain credibility as accurate, prompt sources of information. Becoming knowledgeable about 27 different campuses in the U.W. System, each with its own special programs, can be a difficult and time-consuming task.

In the follow-up study, we found that 81% of the counselors who called HELP had already attempted to find the information they requested through campus catalogs, letters to campuses, or telephone calls; 45% found that the information was not complete; 12% found it confusing; and 27% found that the information just was not available at the time needed.

Our thought was that if the counselor is freed from spending the many hours needed to seek information from catalogs, he would be able to devote more time to other important duties. This is not to say that counseling college bound students is insignificant. Rather, seeking information as it was done in the past is a clerical task, and the professional counselor need not spend a great deal of time on information retrieval if it can be avoided. We feel that through the HELP program the counselor is freed to work on a more professional level with the college bound student, assisting him in his decision-making or meeting some of his other needs. Likewise, since some of these students merely need factual information, the HELP program could serve to free up a counselor's time for more attention to the needs of other students.

The U.W. System is a network of diverse institutions, each with its own unique identity. With this type of diversity available to all students, it would be unfortunate to limit access to them because of time constraints on a counselor or a student becoming overwhelmed by a mountain of obscure information. I would say that for the average student, HELP has opened up at least 20 University System campuses which otherwise might have been overlooked by a student planning his college education. The advantage to the student is considerable. Certainly, by providing ready access to information about all U.W. System campuses, a student has a better chance of finding a campus that will meet his needs.

Besides providing students with more access to university information, HELP can explain variations among different campus programs. Of the total number of calls received during HELP's pilot stage, 31% concerned information on programs and majors. Often the question was, what campuses offer programs in such and such, followed by requests for particular details of the program.

A final important factor in our planning was to give more visibility to all campuses in the U.W. System. We felt at the outset, and this was confirmed in the follow-up study, that most students are reasonably acquainted with only three or four campuses in the U.W. System. There may be one or two campuses near home which he knows about because of proximity and there is the Madison campus which has in the past been more widely known because of its size and national recognition. Likewise, and again based on time constraints, we found that counselors are by and large most familiar with nearby campuses.

Aside from fulfilling an important information service need of students, parents and guidance counselors, I think HELP has several noteworthy internal implications for the University System. First, one requirement for institutional change and improvement is knowing what the problems are. The HELP program serves the University System as a valuable vehicle for feedback information from several of its constituencies. It does so both through the log sheets kept on the subject of each call, and through the return postcard function I mentioned earlier.

Secondly, we can get an indication of the program areas at each campus that potential university students are interested in. Each month we tabulate

the data on the log sheets and distribute a summary of the calls concerning a given campus to its Chancellor and admissions office. This tells campus officials what kinds of questions are being asked about their campuses.

Thirdly, we can benefit from suggestions and criticisms of our programs and the materials we send out and expect guidance counselors and students to work from. Already some comments have produced changes. Several revisions were made in the format and content of the University System's undergraduate majors matrix as a result of guidance counselor suggestions. Student and guidance counselor concerns were also reflected in changes made in a publication describing opportunities at various campuses in the System. In addition, several additions and deletions were made in campus catalogs after errors in them were pointed out by some counselors.

Finally, I think HELP can provide a sort of blood and bones dimension to the work of institutional researchers. The concerns expressed, the suggestions offered, the questions asked, all come from people many of you see mostly as mere statistics. HELP can add a human dimension to your activities and perhaps make your work a bit more responsive, as well as a little more interesting.